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Christina Rossetti's Fallen Women: Biographical Study of the poem 'Goblin Market'

Abstract: This paper looks at Christina Rossetti's views on the 'Fallen Women' and the idea of women falling prey to the temptations and their sexual desires by studying the poem 'Goblin Market'. Most of the interpretations of the poem look at it as trying to empower women and thus in turn look at Rossetti as one of the early feminist writer. This paper tries to approach the poem from a biographical point of view and thus look for Rossetti's source of inspiration in writing this poem. A look at the Rossetti's life can show that the influence of Florence Nightingale and her work as a volunteer in a penitentiary affected her beliefs on fallen women and was inspiration for the 'Goblin Market'.

Keywords: Biographical, Fallen women, Feminism, Goblins, Rossetti, Sisterhood

Interpretation:

Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti has been interpreted using Feminist, Marxist, Freudian and Queer theories over the years. Most critics consider it based on the feminist beliefs and the poem does provide clues to prove this theory. The fact that it tries to provide a completely different picture than the one that the traditionally accepted fairy tales showcase. In the majority of the traditional tales, women characters are used just as a tool to prove the

man's heroism. *Goblin market*, on the other hand, shows that the women can also be the hero of the story that there is no need for any prince in shining armor to come and save the day, a princess can do it as well. This poem narrated in a form closely resembling that of the traditional fairy tale tells a story of a girl poisoned by a poisoned fruit given to her by goblin men. But instead of a man coming to save her, her sister takes the role of the savior.

One of the not so popular interpretations of the poem comes from historical criticism which brings to light another approach to understanding the poem's source, based on the social circumstances of the time and the incidents and events in the author's life. As a reader, one must realize that the poem is not created in isolation but rather is affected by the author's life and the historical period in which the poem was written. This interpretation may seem like leading towards intentional fallacy but it does provide a possible source of the author's inspiration in coming up with the idea for the poem. So to understand this interpretation better it is necessary to look at certain aspects of Rossetti's life.

The feminist critics talk about Rossetti being one of the early feminist writer and how this poem questions women's status in society especially of the 'fallen women'. A glance in Rossetti's life can provide greater clarity about how her views on these 'fallen women' were shaped through her real-life experiences. Casey in her article 'The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"' gives examples of the influence of Florence Nightingale on Rossetti. She was highly influenced by Nightingale's work and attempts for the legitimization of the nursing profession and she herself volunteered as a nurse. From 1859 to 1870 Rossetti worked at St Mary Magdalene Penitentiary. Magdalene laundries or Magdalene asylums were institutions between 18th to 20th century for reforming and rehabilitating the prostitutes or "fallen women". The work she did there and the interactions she had with the women may have shaped her opinions about the whole idea of fallen women and may have inspired the *Goblin Market*.

The poem showcases the notions prevailing in the society at that time period. During the Victorian age, women's sexual experiences were supposed to be restricted to marriage and to be kept in check by a man. For this reason, prostitutes and women who have had some kind of sexual experience outside of wedlock were considered as fallen from the grace of God. This can be seen in the poem in the character of 'Jeanie'; Lizzie, again and again, gives her example to tell Laura that temptations are bad. It was also believed that these women cannot be saved once they have fallen, which again is shown through Jeanie's death and the following lines:

Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Pluck'd from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours?
But ever in the noonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low:
I planted daisies there a year ago
That never blow. (147-161)

As a volunteer working in the penitentiary, Rossetti strongly opposed this prevailing idea, she believed, that even though the society thinks of these women as fallen and beyond help even they can attain redemption, which is what the poem “goblin market” depicts. In the lines:

And new buds with new day
Open'd of cup-like lilies on the stream,
Laura awoke as from a dream (535-537)

Laura who had lost her innocence and was slowly dying is revived by Lizzie.

The poem in the form of Lizzie gives readers a female Christ and Laura can be seen as Eve for eating the forbidden fruit. Rossetti in doing this gives women both the roles of the redeemed and the redeemer. This again shows the influence of Florence Nightingale on her. Florence Nightingale was the one to talk about the idea of female Christ. Nightingale being a woman in upper-class society was for a long time not permitted to become a nurse. Due to this she, in her essay *Cassandra*, is very critical of women's role in society where they are just expected to do their household work and nothing adventurous and exciting. This depiction can be seen in the list of chores present in the poem.

Early in the morning
When the first cock crow'd his warning,
Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie:
Fetch'd in honey, milk'd the cows,
Air'd and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,

Next churn'd butter, whipp'd up cream,

Fed their poultry, sat and sew'd; (199-208)

Lizzie in her attempt to save her sister goes on an adventure breaking this cycle. The poem in various ways shows how society looks at the temptations as sins and something to stay away from like in the lines

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura,

You should not peep at goblin men.”

Lizzie cover'd up her eyes,

Cover'd close lest they should look; (48-51)

But it does not in any way looks down upon Laura for giving in to the temptations. Nowhere in the poem can Lizzie be seen as accusing or blaming Laura for doing what she did. On the other hand, Lizzie is constantly worried about Laura and wants to save her. Lizzie due to her desire to save Laura for the first time tries to look and listen to the goblin men. “And for the first time in her life / Began to listen and look.”(327-328)

Lizzie faces the goblins and the temptations head on and comes back with the antidote without losing anything to the goblins. Her adventure ends with saving her sister. Rossetti, in the same way, does not blame fallen women in society but thinks that they can be saved. The poem ends with both of them telling their children about this adventure and the importance of the sisterhood.

“For there is no friend like a sister

In calm or stormy weather;

To cheer one on the tedious way,

To fetch one if one goes astray,

To lift one if one totters down,

To strengthen whilst one stands.” (562-567)

Rossetti, even though she believes that fallen women can be saved she due to her strong religious beliefs still thinks of giving into one's sexual desires as a sin and considers these women to be fallen even though she may not blame or despise them.

Rossetti respects the work done by the nurses to help these fallen women and considering Rossetti's affiliations with the Magdalene penitentiary the poem can be interpreted as being in praise of the work of the nurses. The sisterhood depicted in the poem can be seen as the sisterhood of nurses and the characters of Lizzie as a nurse and Laura as the fallen woman can be easily seen in the poem. The last few lines also praise the sisterhood and tell that the sisters are there to help each other when in need. These feelings of Rossetti towards her work and the influence of Florence Nightingale may have been the source of inspiration for the poem. If it is so the poem is more about the nurses in the penitentiary and their work rather than feminism as it is understood in a broader sense.

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